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# HEARING NEW VOICES: RE-VIEWING YOUTH JUSTICE POLICY THROUGH PRACTITIONERS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

The relationship between young people and practitioners is the centre-piece of youth justice provision, yet little research-based knowledge has accumulated on its minutiae. After reviewing reforms affecting professional discretion, the paper draws on the concepts of dyadic relationships and praxis to reinvigorate a research agenda aimed at delineating a more nuanced understanding of practice relationships. Drawing on practice wisdom from across related social work fields, we argue that centralizing the practitioner-young person relationship remains the key to successful practice and thus needs greater, more detailed research attention. These claims are supported with a number of pilot interviews with youth justice workers about successful interventions that complement and extend related studies. The paper concludes with suggestions for research to enable joint activity between young people and practitioners to 'rethink' youth justice.

**Key Words:** practitioner-young person relations; youth voice; dyadic relationships

## **Introduction**

Despite the almost perpetual state of change in youth justice policy, the practitioner-young person relationship remains at the heart of youth justice practice (Burnett and McNeill 2005). As successive governments switch tactics to contain youth offending, and strive to manage the widening field of social and economic problems faced by young people using the criminal justice system, the centrality of that relationship becomes ever clearer. Practice literature, across the related fields of youth justice, social work and probation often highlight its crucial importance (Barry, 2007; Farrow et al. 2007; Stephenson et al. 2007; Annison et al., 2008;), with some youth justice studies focusing on the particular ways practitioners engage young people and the importance of this relationship (McNeill, 2006a, 2006b; McNeill and Maruna, 2008). Similarly, a few studies have captured the perspectives of marginalised young people in and outside of the youth justice system (notably Barron, 2000; Sharpe, 2011). Yet the insights provided by these studies have had limited impact on policy, and their implications are by no means universally or systematically embedded as 'best practice'. As a result, there continue to be calls in the academic literature to give greater power and voice to young people in research and policy development processes (Grover, 2004; Case, 2006; Prior and Mason, 2010).

Young people's subjective experiences of youth justice offer a way of understanding young people as subjects with in changing youth justice processes, rather than as objects of study (James, 1993; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2011). Perhaps equally important, young people's accounts of their experiences can provide critical perspectives on the successes and limitations of current policies and practices that are inherently unique and prospectively illuminating. Some empirical work has illustrated the proven effectiveness and potential for including youth perspectives in

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policy development (Milbourne, 2009a; Mycock and Tonge, 2010). Part of the framing focus of this article is the recognition of the importance of young people's experiences of the youth justice system. However, we suggest that young people's perspectives are sometimes difficult to interpret without the corresponding assessments of the practitioners who can gloss their comments – albeit with a critical eye. Not only do the perspectives of practitioners offer crucial reference points for interpreting young people's accounts, and vice versa, their status as co-determinants of the two-way engagement between young person and provider has particular significance in the present political conjuncture in the UK.

In what follows, we begin with a brief survey of recent government reforms of the youth justice system, localisation, professional discretion and the extent to which these may open up potential for more productive young person-practitioner relations. We argue that the current policy moment offers a rare research opportunity to engage in detailed analysis of these relationships. Drawing on the concepts of dyadic relationships and praxis, we illuminate the scope for greater insight that results from examining the 'moments that matter' to young people when they are working with professionals.

We suggest that facilitating replicable successes in redirecting the trajectories of young people means maximising the discretion of youth justice workers to hear and respond to young people's voices, and to 'rethink' aspects of practice that impair what can be heard and acted upon. We argue that the road to better outcomes will begin from enhanced confidence amongst policy makers and managers in the unique capability of the best practitioner-young person relations. Our claims are variously illustrated and supported by extracts from pilot interviews with a range of youth justice workers in one Youth Offending Team (YOT), augmented by practice-based research literature. The article concludes by suggesting that to understand how young people experience youth justice and access alternative futures (or fail to do so), a stronger evidence base is needed on the processes of mediation between young person and practitioner and on the ways young people themselves might thereby help to 'rethink' youth justice.

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## The new policy context and practitioner discretion

The present conjuncture constitutes one of a now-lengthy series of critical moments in the re-steering of youth justice policy and practice in England (Muncie and Hughes, 2002 Goldson, 2010). The election of the coalition government and its Breaking the Cycle Green Paper (Ministry of Justice, 2010) marked another shift in the political discourse and rhetoric. The Green Paper began in an ambitious tenor:

*37. This is a radical and decentralising reform. We will give providers the freedom to innovate, increase their discretion to get the job done, and open up the market to new providers from the private, voluntary and community sectors.*

*38. Professionals in the public, private, voluntary and community sectors will be given much greater discretion and be paid according to the results they deliver in reducing reoffending.*

By the time of the government response to the Green Paper, ambitions already appeared considerably more modest. The word ‘discretion’ all but disappeared, and is never used in relation to the youth justice service. The commitment became largely confined to two undertakings:

*33. In the youth justice system, we will end the current high level of central performance monitoring and develop a risk based monitoring programme ...*

*35. The new approach will be based on the principles that youth justice services will be locally determined and driven, maximise value for money, be publicly accountable through a Minister, and be lighter-touch. We want to target those Youth Offending Teams that are underperforming and free up the best performing teams to provide greater opportunity to innovate (Ministry of Justice, 2011).*

In November 2011 a proposal to abolish the Youth Justice Board (YJB –the executive public body which oversees the youth justice system in England and Wales) was stalled, following opposition in the House of Lords. The Government responded by setting up a Triennial Review of the YJB, to oversee its effectiveness. The review closed in February 2013 and has yet to report, but in the interim the YJB has continued to operate under revised conditions. In 2012, this allowed the Ministry of Justice to revise the youth justice standards. The year-long National Standards Trial was described by the renewed YJB as:

*An opportunity to test and evaluate the impact of:*

- *Increasing opportunity for professional discretion in line with Justice Green Paper recommendations.*
  - *Increasing local freedoms and flexibilities.*
  - *Delivery within the new environment of increased local accountability and local determination.*
- (Walker, 2012)*

From the outset, in the briefing for Youth Offending Team Management Boards, an ‘increased sense of value for YOT staff and their professionalism’ is directly associated with ‘improved managerial oversight’ (YJB, 2012a). In the briefing for magistrates, assurances are offered that ‘Professional discretion does not mean compliance will be relaxed’ (YJB, 2012b). The number of relaxations of regulatory control is commensurately modest. The ONSET referral and assessment

tool, used for all young people deemed at risk of offending, remains recommended but the requirement to use it is diluted to ensuring that young people are only 'formally assessed'. For out of court disposals, ASSET, the standardized actuarial assessment tool used for all young people that have offended, risk assessment scores are replaced with a framework 'based on professional judgment'. And the requirement for monthly home visits is relaxed. Most other stipulations remain in place.

The government's plan for decentralization and localization has also driven the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 under which Police Crime Commissioners (PCCs) have been given powers to set local strategic policing and crime priorities and work cooperatively with YOTs to provide an 'efficient and effective criminal justice system' (Home Office, 2012). One risk is that PCCs will be over-responsive to high-profile local concerns which centre on 'problem youth'. Greater pressure on the police and YOTs to use their powers to criminalise young people further and decrease discretionary practice (Newburn, 2011) is a strong possibility.

Prior to these changes, the ex-Chair of the YJB had concluded that:

*The test of the Government's commitment [to increased discretion and local control] will come when local failure and scandal strikes. But it is to be hoped that that risk will be taken and, when the test comes, faced up to as a reasonable price to pay (Morgan, 2011:17).*

Seen in this context, there is a powerful case to be made that increased practitioner discretion offers new opportunities to produce tangibly improved outcomes. Yet as Prior and Mason (2010: 211) have argued:

The skills and knowledge required by practitioners to develop relationships with young offenders that will engage and sustain them in intervention programmes is a core theme of the 'effective practice' literature. Yet this question of how to secure young people's engagement is scarcely examined in research on interventions with young offenders, despite an apparent preoccupation with 'what works'.

Similarly, France and Homel (2006: 305-06) argue that what young people really value (and are generally not receiving) 'is not so much programmes and content but a good supportive relationship with an adult who is not judgmental and is able to offer guidance and advocacy when needed'. They conclude that 'to gain a greater understanding of these processes we need to listen to the voices and perspectives of young people themselves'. McNeill and Maruna's (2008) work notwithstanding, there is a particular need to enhance understanding of what it means to support young people in ways that treat their reasoning and decisions as resources to be harnessed and that recognise their autonomy and value their free will.

### **Practitioner discretion and young person-practitioner relations**

Whilst current policy rhetoric purports to be championing greater local control and practitioner discretion, such reforms would entail deeper changes to YOT policy and practice than those currently envisaged. Deficit reduction measures have cut services for young people in conflict with the law, opening them up to market forces allowing local authorities to explore payment-by-results financial models (Puffett, 2012). Even under optimum conditions, greater local control and increased practitioner discretion cannot be assumed to be connected. Far from advancing in lock-step, increased localisation is in principle capable of reducing practitioner discretion. It has the potential to generate small-scale centralism, whereby newly empowered local managers replace the paraphernalia of centralist controls with their own closely monitored strictures over the discretions of front-line staff, in pursuit of easy-to-show targets that measure outputs not outcomes. Austerity budgets could exacerbate these tendencies amongst ever-more-accountable YOT managers labouring under the gaze of an ever-more-watchful YJB and Ministry of Justice.

Certainly, there is evidence that street-level workers in public bureaucracies carve out scope for their own judgment even within centralist bureau-regulatory regimes (Lipsky, 1980). The social work literature has deliberated the scope and utilization of 'practice wisdom' (DeRoos, 1990: 282), understood as a form of professionally or locally held knowledge that practitioners draw upon when exercising discretion. Such discretion is often utilised in contexts of conflict between 'front line' workers and managers or when guidelines or instructions cannot be circumscribed (see Lipsky, 1980:15). In youth justice, there is strong evidence that discretion can thrive under bureaucratic or managerialist centralism (Bonta, 2002; Baker, 2004, 2005), but also that its exercise 'cuts both ways' in terms of 'justice by geography' (Goldson and Hughes, 2010: 220). With the introduction of the YJB's standardised assessments (ASSET and ONSET), clear conflicts emerged between adherence to regulatory demands and exercising autonomous professional judgment (Baker, 2005). The dangers of unfettered discretion need no elaboration. In the last instance, it is youth justice workers who hold unique powers to criminalise young people and set them on the path to custodial sentences. Their powers to act are ascribed and so are unassailable, in statutory terms. But they are not unavoidable: the powers of youth justice workers not to act, by the ways in which they choose to interpret actions, seek further evidence and deploy it to criminalising ends, or not, are a crucial facet of discretionary power (see Bateman, 2011). That the most slavish forms of rule following are more self-protective for youth justice workers than malign in their intent towards those in their care serves only to underscore the insidiousness of the present conjuncture. Evidence for the claim that genuinely productive discretion remains, despite cut-backs, and need not degenerate into inconsistency is at best ambiguous.

If worker discretion is not an unalloyed 'good', then, it nevertheless retains the capacity for beneficial outcomes for young people. The case for attending to the significant lacunae in our understanding of the minutiae of the practitioner-young person relationship is more compelling. In particular, more detailed studies are needed to assess how practitioners can optimise latitude in their negotiations with young people and maximise the efficacy of good relationships. Alongside this, deeper understanding is needed of the ways in which practitioners can usefully recognise and utilise the autonomy and decision-making capacities of young people.

For many vulnerable young people, hardship is perceived as 'normal'. High-risk activities and environments, as well as involvement in crime, shape their everyday lives (MacDonald et al. 2001; Webster et al., 2006). Thus some patterns of offending might be understood as 'healthy adaptations' that allow them to endure adverse, unhealthy and sometimes harmful circumstances (Ungar 2004, p.6). These findings suggest that children's lives are lived with purpose even when their conduct is counter-normative (see Ungar and Teram, 2005). Greater consideration is needed of how practitioners might balance a young person's autonomy with interventions that reduce harmful behaviours but do not advocate choices that conflict with the complex and profoundly challenging circumstances to which young people have adapted.

### **Praxis, dyadic relationships and young people's experiences of youth justice**

The centrality of the professional-client relationship to social work has been widely recognised in the practice literature (Barry, 2007; Annison et al., 2008; Eadie, et al, 2013). Likewise, there has been much consideration of 'what works' to engage young people in youth justice (Dowden and Andrews 2004; Prior and Mason, 2010). The young person-practitioner relationship is the site at which practitioners gauge their latitude to mediate young people's needs to make responses 'fit' professional obligations that meet statutory requirements (Trevithick 2005; Prior and Mason 2010). As Burnett (2004: 183-4) points out, studies examining 'casework relationships' frequently indicate the importance that young people attach to their relationships with practitioners. But her overview also acknowledges that the literature demonstrates that the operation and effects of these relationships in youth justice are little understood.

We suggest that a useful starting point for a more robust theoretical and empirical exploration of practitioner-young person relationships can be found by connecting the concept of dyadic relationships to the concept of praxis. Dyadic relationships involve two people in a relationship that includes some level of interdependency. The idealised stereotype of mother-infant relationships is the archetypal dyad in which the axes of interdependency are asymmetrical between the infant's total dependence, and the mothers' emotional gratification. In contrast, in stereotypical dyadic relationships of sexual intimacy, some aspects of reciprocal gratification and pleasure approach highly symmetrical levels of mutuality.

Not all dyadic relationships are mutual, gratifying, or constructively reciprocal. Sears' (1951) classic work identifies habitual enmity as a form of closely-bonded dyadic relationship. Simmel's (1902) sociological perspective proposed that dyads are stable units through which solidarity and intimacy build. But he also viewed conflict between individuals as, paradoxically, capable of promoting a sense of social unity and cohesion. This is because they imply both engaged reciprocity and conjoint but contested concern about the shared principles that are pre-conditions for conflict (Simmel, 1973; Ashley and Orenstein 1985/2001). Both parties care enough about what they dispute to make it a source of connectedness as well as dissent between them.

One effect of closely interactive dyads is that the more one party discloses in conversation, the greater the likelihood that the other will reciprocate. Each party incrementally takes risks in step with the other by placing increasing trust in him/her. Both become more motivated to extend the relationship because of the level of mutuality it generates and the cathartic effects of disclosure (Wolman, 1973).

Classic social-psychological theories of dyads are relevant to the characterisation of aspects of relationships between professionals and young people, with obvious application to youth justice. For example, incrementally escalating disclosure will be familiar to many workers who are highly skilled at inducing young people to reveal important aspects of their experiences and emotions by disclosing selected information about their own. Many workers would also recognise some modes of conflict as forms of engagement that become precursors to constructive dialogue, if skilfully handled.

It is in the interstices of meeting individual need and statutory obligations that this skilful work of practitioners sometimes constitutes praxis (from the Greek word for action, typically counterposed to theoretical reasoning in general usage). In its more recent sociological usages praxis brings action together with practical reasoning, beliefs and knowledge, in a way that is pertinent to professional practice. Professionals utilise knowledge in ways that are founded in theorised reason but moderate and adapt it by applying 'practice wisdom'. One definition proposes that: Praxis refers to the link between theory and practice, and the struggle that exists in all intellectual movements to transform existing (oppressive or marginalizing) societal conditions into meaningful reflection, action and change. Praxis is a complicated and intricate phenomenon because it entails a reconstitution of culture, institutions, relationships and social interaction, such that a more humane, emancipatory climate of pro-social civic life prevails (Arrigo, 2001: 219-20)

The prominence Arrigo affords to social interaction as the means to reflection and change is important here. On the one hand, professionals can bring to their dyadic relationships professional resources of knowledge and the capacity to act, by means of the material resources they command. On the other it is only through social interaction in a productive and mutual

relationship that these resources can occasion effective action on the part of young people, and so induce change. The dyadic relationship is in this sense essential to effective praxis. But so is the discretion to apply 'practice wisdom'. Arrigo then applies this thinking to the specific context of oppressed, disenfranchised groups:

*The key to transformation is reflection and dialogue in which the subjugated speak 'true words' about themselves, about the conditions in which they live, and about the necessary and inevitable process by which change (and alternative emancipatory reality) can materialize (Arrigo, 2001: 220).*

In professional-young person relationships, this emphasis on reflection and dialogue builds on the importance of social interaction and the dyadic relationship. But also essential to inducing change is the notion of the 'true words' of the subjugated. This indicates the irreducible necessity of young people's authentic accounts in their own voices, reflecting on their subjective experiences, if the dyadic relationship is to be productive.

### ***Obstacles to Praxis***

Seen in this light, facilitating replicable successes in the shape of 'acting upon' young people's trajectories means optimising the discretion of youth justice workers to hear and respond to young people's voices in meaningful, validating ways. The aim, then, is for any changes of behaviour to be acts of genuine organic self-determination by young people, not acts of induced adjustment or re-steering.

This is not to imply that authentic voices go unheard at present. But between current practice and more effective processes of facilitation lie some important obstacles. Firstly, it is far from clear whether those voices that are heard speak 'true words': authentic voice depends upon genuinely dyadic relations of trust and confidence. Secondly, it is also unclear whether current policies enable practitioners the scope to encourage self-determination and accept that this may lead in unpredictable directions for the young person. Thirdly, even in the most propitious circumstances, the effects of hearing and acting on authentic voice will not necessarily improve the prospects for young person. Whilst inexperienced practitioners can learn from the more experienced workers about utilizing praxis, even this approach does not render successes replicable. Replicability does not imply illusionary recipes for guaranteed success, but identification of those qualities of the interaction that can be relied upon to be effective in some other circumstances. High levels of replicability are heavily dependent on local contingencies and variables, the skills of practitioners and the dispositions of young people.

Still greater obstacles were endemic in the highly managerialised modes of organisation of YOTs under New Labour (see McLaughlin and Muncie, 2000). Pursuing this line of analysis, Pitts (2001:8) identified the evolution of a two-tier staffing strategy that ensures that those at the front line of interaction with young people are those least well-placed to subvert centrally conceived programmes by deploying powers of professional discretion. He foresaw:

*....a new division of labour in which non-professionals 'deliver' the 'programmes' and the dwindling number of professional workers become, essentially administrative, 'case managers'.*

Although the validity of Pitts' (2001:12) early predictions would now need qualifying, his point about the reduced discretion of those who work face-to-face with young people remains highly pertinent, when he argues that:



*The overwhelming desire of government to control policy all the way down to the point of implementation means that a rich repertoire of responses to the complex problem of youth crime is reduced to a narrow range of correctional techniques...*

In the next section we explore the importance of dyadic relations and practitioner discretion by drawing on new interview data.

### **Pilot study: practitioners' reflections on the practitioner-young person relationship**

Our preliminary explorations of discretion with youth justice practitioners suggest that Pitts' 'rich repertoire of responses' remains alive and present. Our pilot study of desistance from offending suggests that there are encouraging prospects for praxis built on good relationships between young people and professionals. It comprised seven extended semi-structured interviews with practitioners in a YOT in the English east-midlands: a senior manager, two officers, two speech and language therapists, an education worker and a substance misuse worker.

The interviews found ample evidence of recognition of the importance of the relationship between practitioner and young person on the part of most participants. What distinguished some practitioners' comments was their perspicacity on this subject. Workers tended initially to attribute the success or otherwise of the relationship to serendipity. The experienced senior youth justice officer defaults to this position:

*....well I think the relationship with the officer will then affect the level of engagement and that's just a magic formula isn't it? Why do some people get on and some don't?*

However, this rapidly develops into an assessment of some of the more critical ingredients of successful relations:

*Well also I think it's about if the young person has someone to listen to them, which doesn't have to be done in a namby pamby [sic] way, you can be quite firm or strict with somebody if you like but they have got respect for that... I think it is a mutual respect which makes a big difference.*

She then begins to delineate some of the core components of good relations:

*And also just having somebody that is not directly related to the family who may be in a position of authority, who can relate to them, act as an advocate for them, which I think we do and be firm and fair and consistent.*

Similarly, other research on youth work has found that relationships based on trust and mutual respect are highly valued by young people and often stand in contrast to other adult relationships in their lives which have led rejection or negative experiences (Merton, et al, 2004: 9). In addition to the importance of trust, practice literature from social work has identified genuineness, warmth, empathy and advocacy as essential elements of helping relationships with children (Brandon et al, 1998). Young people in Green et al.'s (2013) study believed that successful relationships with workers were dependent on genuineness and a belief that workers should act as advocates for them. Similarly the importance of trust was raised by young people as essential, particularly as young people felt prior interactions with many adults or institutions had resulted in rejection or negative experiences (Milbourne, 2009b: 355). One young person noted:

*You need to see what can happen to believe it'd be different.... It's hard to trust it's not just a con....*

From our interviews, further exposition then begins to demonstrate the purposes of this approach, and the powers it can confer when working with young people to move away from potentially harmful behaviour:

*I have had some very difficult conversation with some of them...I've said look you know your behaviour has been very difficult I am going to have to take you back to court and you will have to go to custody but we can work through that and still have the relationship because they have known all along that that will happen to them if they do that (emphasis added).*

The framing of this officer's account reveals a depth of understanding of the negotiated nature of this relationship. The connection between young person and practitioner appears to be based on mutual understanding that places the durability of the relationship at the centre of the exchange: the relationship will survive the warning of impending judgement. Such an exchange is also evident in Ilan's (2010: 32) study. He argues that trusting relationships developed over time help to 'initiate a gradual process of transformative reflexivity'. One of Ilan's practitioners argues:

*I'll need to stay with them for a year nearly before finally I could say to them... They have to be aware they might be the kings of the block, but they're not the kings of the world as such and they can't do anything they want to do... a year anyway for any impact to be had...or understanding to be instilled (ibid).*

At the heart of this process is the negotiated connection between worker and young person that allows the practitioner to challenge without deterioration in the relationship. This contention is supported by research which demonstrates that while many young people distrust statutory services, some relate to their social worker and show personalised trust of them (Farnfield, 1998 cited in Hill, 1999). In some respects our data and the supporting literature exemplifies Simmel's dyadic relations of conflict (see above), wherein the source of tension is affirmative not only of the relationship but also of the possibilities for change.

At least as informative as the nature of the relationship between young person and practitioner are the consequences of its termination. A speech and language specialist reported that:

*...interestingly there are situations where some young people have ended their orders and they are actually quite disappointed because they have lost ...the support network they have had here. There have been reported cases of re-offending which well may be linked to that, the need to get back that support again.*

This speaks strongly to the mooted levels of (inter)dependency that can develop through genuinely dyadic practitioner-young person relations –but also to the dangers of reliance that may flow from the sudden severance of the relationship.

Some practitioners are explicit about recognising the relative autonomy of young people, and its importance to successful relationships. Asked in what way she thought her work was sometimes able to promote resiliency despite strong indicators to the contrary, an ex-probation worker replied by reference to her specialist interest in harm reduction through substance misuse:

*So I look at current use, what they are using but I focus on strengths and their attitude to drugs, how they view the future. And whether or not there is anything we can work on. If*

*they say I'm not looking to make any change, then in a nutshell I can't impose that. Then I say it would be great if I could but I can't. So let's look at what we can do...It's a difficult area of work to impose on a young person because they have their own views, so right from the off I say I can't make you do anything, but I will help you live more healthily in a way that will stop you coming back in contact with the court...You need to respect their control (emphasis added).*

The balance of control and autonomy between young person and worker is fine. Other research with young homeless people indicated that young people struggled with overbearing social workers and sought some independence in decision-making (an observation also made by de Winter and Noom, 2003). Acknowledgement of the interests and motivations of young people means 'respecting their control' as a crucial element in the reciprocity of a genuinely dyadic relationship. It was the explicit focus of some of the accounts in our interviews. An education worker for the YOT observed:

*If you can find their one little hook and fix them onto that, and then other things... if that's going right, then other things work out for them too ... it was only because we so happened to go to [place] that he hooked onto it. With a girl that was here on an intensive order she went to work at the manor in the stables and that was her little bit of a saviour. She didn't like horses, she didn't want to ride but she loved being there and doing all the mucking out... so it is just trying to find that thing for them.*

The earlier account cited by the senior officer of how the identified success occurred turned on chance events that opened up whole areas of discussion and possibilities:

*The work that we did with him, we gradually reengaged him. He was a very bright boy, but what we did to begin with, so things like, for example we would go to the city centre for a walk and he would have to go and get something from the shop. And he was amazed that his officer would talk to other people in a shop, you know how you do...he would say why are you talking to that person you don't know them?...and it kind of brought out the issue of communication and introducing him to new things?*

This worker's comments highlight the importance of the nuances, boundaries and detailed dynamics within the relationship and how these factors might affect change. Rodd et al's. (2009: 8) interviews with youth workers also highlight the creative use of dyadic relations, space and place when working with young people:

*The informal stuff is as important as the formal stuff; it is the glue that holds our work together, the unstructured time, the coffee breaks, the sitting around the campfire...It can work to "walk and talk" ...travelling parallel, stuff comes out ...with boys, even sitting at McDonalds is too confrontational, we just go through the drive-through, and then we can talk and eat and drive.*

Set alongside the acceptance of client autonomy, it was clear, in our case example, that the officer created opportunities and contrived contexts in which the young person could envisage his world differently. She utilised young people's trust to stimulate imagined possibilities merely by being in unfamiliar 'everyday' places. 'Novelty within sameness' was itself a stimulus. The young man's capacity to envision other lives was then deliberately stretched beyond familiarity so that he was eased 'out of his comfort zone'. These processes of shifting fields of vision allowed him to begin to reconceptualise himself:

*... He began to realize that he hadn't wasted everything because he was quite bright but he hadn't been at school. So he got into college...there is still the odd blip if you like...he also found a girlfriend which was also a stabilising influence... We did interesting interventions with him...he would say I haven't been to this part of [place] before. So we would do a lot about broadening his horizons, making him do things that were slightly out of his comfort zone. Probably it was quite successful with him.*

The theme of broadening horizons and introducing hope to young people appears to be a common goal, as evidenced by Lemma (2010: 18-19). In her research looking at the power of the relationship between socially excluded young people and youth workers/ therapists, two young people reflected on how their workers allowed them to reimagine their own capabilities:

*She made me realize....that I am ok and there's something good in all of us really and my key worker basically made me see my talents and believed in me... you never knew you had so much in you because you used to doubt yourself, but with my key worker's help I started to see myself differently...*

In our research it was evident that building respectful relations with young people was the basis for making changes in their lives. There appeared to be 'tipping points' in young people's thinking processes. *"He began to realize that he hadn't wasted everything..."* and *"If you can find their one little hook..."* are the 'moments that matter' in the process of change. This idea echoes the findings in research conducted by Annison et al. (2008: 266) on probation officer perspectives. They highlighted the importance of:

*...establishing working relationships with offenders and the 'ah-ha' factor when they change from contemplation to action.*

Similarly in Lemma (2010:417) a practitioner remarks on this process of change through building good relationships:

*She was hard work at times and she got under my skin, but I could see that this was her way of communicating, and you adjust to that and respond accordingly —you have to give them space to do this ... years with some of them ... but then it's like a switch and they get it ...*

These comments from practitioners open up critical questions on two fronts. The first concerns the degree of discretion they have to judge projected successful trajectories. The second asks what accounts each of the young people would give of their relationship with their worker, of its dyadic qualities, and of its capacity to motivate new actions or steer tactics of desistance. What is already clear from our interviews, and consistent with the very particular work of McNeill and Maruna (2008) and the other studies we have referred to is that it is the dynamic and reciprocal nature of some relationships between young people and practitioners that makes them effective. It is also this dynamism that qualifies some modes of practice as praxis –while others remain its antithesis: mechanical formulaic manifestations of the pursuit of prescribed procedures.

Our pilot sample was representative of the YOT under examination. The practitioners interviewed constituted a high proportion of the YOT workforce. Likewise, the sample included a range of professions beyond traditional youth justice work. The participants were not products of a unitary organisational culture which reproduced itself. As we have shown, our findings are also consistent with others from a small but highly illustrative literature. But there remains a clear need for more extensive and more widely representative data to confirm our initial findings under significantly altered contemporary conditions and a distinctive new conjuncture. The small number of extracts we have derived from a detailed and extensive trawl of other research literature across youth work, social work and the probation service indicates how little intensive

study has been dedicated to analysis of the minutiae of successful working relationships identifying 'moments that matter' between young people and practitioners.

If future studies support our initial findings there are good grounds to contend that it is only by hearing the voices of both practitioners and the young people concerned that it is possible to determine whether practitioners are currently becoming rule-following operatives, or are developing as professionals who place improved and informed judgement above procedures in the authentic pursuit of praxis. In optimum circumstances, by 'getting inside' genuinely dyadic practitioner-young person relationships, researchers have access to unique insights into effective working. Consistent with Pawson and Tilley's (1997) pioneering work on 'realist(ic) evaluation' using carefully sourced high-quality data, well-founded processes for co-analysing practitioner and client perceptions, and rigorous frameworks for interpretation, such insights have an alluring scope to go beyond defining the conditions for best effective practice. They can enable young people to provide effective critical assessments of youth justice policy and practice, in conjunction with those of their front-line workers who are capable of renewing it and improving its efficacy. This approach would both endorse and build directly on the findings of research by McNeill and Maruna (2008) and others, and would extend it, not only with a more fine-grained analysis of the conditions of genuinely dyadic relations and modes of praxis, but by asking what possibilities such an analysis opens up for re-imagining those elements of youth justice that stand or fall on the quality of relationships.

## **Concluding Comments**

We believe that there is scope for new ground to be broken by using a research approach which aims to enable young people and practitioners to 'rethink' youth justice policy and practice in ways that are beyond the prevailing range of vision of managers and policy-makers. We are aware of the high claims this makes, and of the complexity, intensity and difficulty of framing research that can even begin to deliver the potential we have identified. This goes beyond 'getting inside' dyadic relationships and extracting available insights. It implies a different mode of 'doing youth justice research' that goes well beyond 'action research'. It entails suspending disbelief in the perceptions of young people convicted of criminal acts and recognizing 'moments that matter' to young people. It entails identifying the very best forms of praxis at the hands of the most inspired practitioners. It risks levels of attrition in the pursuit of convincing instances of 'young person-practitioner rethinking' that are beyond what any single project could sustain. In effect, it calls for a new research modality that will take multiple iterations to achieve the potential optimum ends we have identified.

But the returns are potentially enormous. Aspects of the approach we are advocating have already been deployed. Robertson et al's (2006) study of persistent young offenders who could no longer be catered for through local authority provision indicates the prospective power of this approach. So also McCalman et al.'s (2009) account of project work with young Aboriginal men; James and McNeil's (2009) study of the use of drama with young offenders; and Goddard and Myers' (2011) study which upheld some of the more ambitious claims of neo-liberal governmentality theory to promote self-governance. What limits such otherwise valuable projects is their exceptionalism: all were conducted outside the mainstream of provision. What remains so palpably absent is a generalisable modality of intervention within mainstream provision that builds on dyadic relations and on effective praxis without reducing them to standardised procedures or universalised prescriptions.

Harris and Allen's (2011: 413) highly practical study which explored the importance of young people's experiences and views of multi-agency working adds a particularly important dimension to these arguments. They write:

*The idea that professional knowledge is created through experience, and that its nature depends upon the cumulative acquisition, selection and understanding of that experience, assisted the analysis and the interpretation of [our] findings.*

The professionals who took part in the study tended to agree that young people's involvement was important in developing highly relevant and accessible multi-agency provision. They also noted that involvement was instrumental in providing better calibration between the needs of young people and the services provided. However, professionals also reported that engaging young people and the community in joint decision-making and planning continued to represent a challenge.

Harris and Allen's remarks make quite explicit the recognition that how young people's voices are heard is in part a function of how practitioners work in particular institutional contexts. The interaction between young people and their principal professional contacts is key to how young people's experiences and views are heard, and to what is heard. And that interaction is itself conditioned by the working contexts of professionals. Harvey (2011) has recently argued that the goals of understanding human complexity and social context are noticeably absent from much contemporary criminal justice policy and practice. Yet both are more than anywhere manifested and experienced in the personal interaction between young person and practitioner. Both are products of other independent contextual conditions. And it is these conditions and the interaction that they produce that are the palpable gap in understanding that defines the terrain of this paper, and the case for research and innovation that it might usefully inform.

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